

The Belgian View of the Atlantic Reflex I

By [Giles Scott-Smith](#)

February 8, 2010

By THB's Frank Gerits.

In an article in the [NRC-Handelsblad](#), Giles Scott-Smith points towards the decisive role of the 'Atlantic reflex' in Dutch foreign policy. The Dutch government considered the Iraq war to be an issue of Alliance rather than of international law. The David's report has already received elaborate attention, but I believe that deeper insights lie in a comparison between Dutch and Belgian diplomacy. This perspective is interesting because Dutch and Belgian transatlantic relations during the Cold War were very similar. As Giles points out in his article, the Netherlands, like Belgium, did not unconditionally support the U.S. during the Cold War. The Netherlands and the U.S, like Belgium and the US, had their disagreements about Korea, about the European Defence Community, about decolonisation and about strategic missiles during the 1980s. From a historical perspective the question then becomes: so much for similarities – why the different response to the Iraq War? Belgium loudly advocated pacifism, why didn't the Dutch do the same?

From a Belgian perspective the explanation of an Atlantic Reflex does not really succeed in its attempt to explain the Dutch decision making process. The so-called reflex looks more like a twitch, because Belgian foreign policy is pervaded by what I call the 'European Reflex'. Simply stated, foreign policy officials attach more value to the European Union than to the Atlantic connection. As Rik Coolsaet points out, Belgium has been surrounded by big states from its birth as a nation in 1830. Caution for pressure by large countries, i.e. the United States, is in Coolsaet's logic a subconscious component of Belgian foreign policy.

The anti-American posture in the transatlantic conflict over Iraq stemmed from this reasoning. For Belgium, large powers that disregard international law are an unstable factor in the international system. To correct this behavior the country wants to build a strong European community. For Belgium Europe is not mere strategic choice. Belgian diplomats religiously pull the European card.

Prime Minister Guy Verhofstad stated in 2002 that he wanted to work towards a new Atlantic Alliance in which a collective European defense effort would be organized that could also function as an independent unit. The ultimate goal for Belgium is a federal, autonomous Europe. This European reflex, together with domestic support, prevented the Belgian government from supporting the Iraq War. It was very receptive to the reaction of big European states such as Germany and France, founding members of the EU that also condemned the war. Although it cannot be doubted that Belgian politicians themselves were genuinely against the war, the fact that Belgium could so forcefully take an anti-American stance without fear of any real retribution was because the government knew that its critique was supported by two strong European states.

Belgium found support in Europe and as a result did not consider the Alliance to be fundamental in this decision, even though the NATO headquarters are located in Evere, near Brussels. The absence of disagreement and consequently the absence of a broad discussion

within Belgian society also explains why the David's Report has not received a lot of attention here. Conversely, Wilder's trial has received more in depth coverage in the media and will undoubtedly fill more space in the Belgian newspapers in the coming months because the Vlaams Belang has also faced criminal charges for racism.

The Belgian View II will be posted tomorrow.....

<http://www.thehollandbureau.com/2010/02/08/guest-blog-frank-gerits-on-the-belgian-view-of-the-atlantic-reflex-i/>